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SERMON BY THE REV. WILLIAM D. CAIRNS, A. M.

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PAUL BEFORE FELIX:

A Sermon,

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Acts xxiv. 25—"*And as he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled, and answered, Go thy way for this time; when I have a more convenient season, I will call for thee.*"

THE subject, though one of every-day consideration, is replete with profit to the inquiring mind. It equally exhibits *those truths* which it most behoves us to contemplate—the *effect* which it is their object to accomplish, as awakening to the consciousness of sin—and the *manner* in which they are received often by those to whom they are declared.

The characteristics of the human heart are always the same. Circumstances alone occasion the differences which are every day observable. And individuals are ever the representatives only of the species to which they belong, exhibiting in their own condition and habitudes the leading traits by which the whole are distinguished; and standing forth as examples of what man is in his generic character, and the course he will follow under the combined influence of certain prevailing motives, and, unrestrained by the operations of sanctifying grace, to the rejection even of those duties which conscience designates as right.

As attending to this, we are possessed of no ordinary advantage in our estimate of human condition; and we have the inestimable benefit also of applying it as a test of personal character in the sight of GOD. Indeed, the only profitable way either to read the Scriptures, or to hear them preached, is with a view to this their particular and most undoubted application.

We must *feel* that we have an interest in them; that they are addressed directly to the conscience — that they have an immediate claim upon the heart — and that their examples have been set forth as illustrations chiefly of what human nature is in the different situations which it is called to occupy, and the different relations which it is left to sustain in this present life. The great mirror of truth is thus held up in such a diversity of lights before us, as that we cannot fail to discern ourselves in it. And such a knowledge is thereby imparted to us also of the heart, in the midst of its corruptions, as utterly to preclude a misjudgment concerning it, where an inquiry as to its character is dispassionately begun; and so as to conduct us likewise to its ultimate and complete renewal, where the work of its rectification is persevered in, with an humble reliance upon the assisting grace of God.

These things are abundantly "profitable therefore for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness; that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." This is their *design; improved*, this will will be their end. They show forth the *nature*, the *power*, the *efficacy*, of Gospel truth. They exhibit it in its application to *ourselves*. They call *us* to make a sanctified use of it; and accordingly, as we shall be enabled to discern the leading features of our minds, and to trace out the prevailing affections of our own hearts, so as to be instructed and warned by their examples, shall we be in the end benefited by them. For, as saying to us, in the emphatic language of the Prophet to David, "Thou art the man;" and, as opening to us such views of our own condition before God, as we find exhibited in his holy word, they fit us for that use and improvement of them which will set their examples as beacons before us, to warn us from the paths of error, and guide us into the way of truth. Therefore, this defence of St. Paul before the Roman Governor was put upon record; and, in the course of it, whilst those things are declared which may be felt to be of the deepest and most lasting importance to each of us, with their legitimate effect in awakening to the consciousness of individual guilt, we shall find exhibited

also, in the utter aversion of the heart from the contemplation of spiritual truth, one of the prime instruments of self-deception, and one of the most powerful weapons with which "the adversary" accomplishes the destruction of immortal souls. "Go thy way for this time," is the plausible evasion offered; "when I have a more convenient season I will call for thee," the excuse with which conscience is satisfied; and though awakened to the most sensible conviction "of sin, of righteousness, and of a judgment to come;" yea, though so awakened as even to *tremble* under the apprehensions which are excited by them, the voice of admonition is silenced — the stirrings of the HOLY SPIRIT are resisted — the fear of GOD is successfully banished from the heart; and the dupe of a self-practised deception perseveringly encourages himself in the indulgence of a false security when every thing is conspiring to assure him that only sudden and irremediable destruction is awaiting him.

1. In the text, we have exhibited, in the first place, the substance of Gospel truth. Paul "reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come." He "reasoned"—he addressed himself to the understanding and the heart. It formed no part of his endeavor to excite the passions, to create an undue effervescence of feeling which would subside with the preacher's voice. His subject was an important one. It was of the most weighty import to those especially who were then before him. He addressed himself therefore particularly to them; and, though their prisoner, under restraint before them, with matchless intrepidity, he declared to them the truth — he set before them the character of their past lives — he addressed himself to their consciences on the ground of their transgressions—he accused them of their violations of the moral law — and forewarned them of the fearful consequences of their sins, when they should be called into judgment finally on account of them.

And these are things which it behoves *us*, my hearers, to make the subjects of particular and patient consideration — "Righteousness," "Temperance," "Judgment." In the first is included those *rules* by which we must be governed in our

intercourse with men and in our relations to God: in the second, those maxims of prudence and laws of life which make up the directory of our daily conduct: and in the third, those weighty considerations and most influential motives which arise out of the knowledge of man's real character, and the bearing which it will of necessity have upon his future and eternal destiny.

In no respect, as he stood connected with these most important, most solemn truths, could the Roman Governor acquit himself, in his own estimation; and the unaffected simplicity with which the force of conviction upon him is herein related, whilst it commends to us the narrative, exhibits him as a most persuasive example to warn *us* against the abuse of similar convictions — "He that hath ears to hear, therefore, let him hear."

No man, my hearers, can stand fully acquitted on the ground to which the Apostle here brings the licentious Felix. He may not indeed be as devoid of principle — he may not be as loose in practice — he may even be confessedly upright in his ordinary dealings with his fellow-men — he may be pure also from the stain of any great outward defilement — but, "if God should be strict to mark his transgressions against him, he could not answer him for one of a thousand." In a state of impenitence, in particular, he is open to the charge of *unrighteousness:* for, whatever the character of his external morality may be, and however high he may rise in the estimation of those who can judge only after the outward appearance, he is still *unjust to* God, in robbing him of the legitimate affections of his heart, in withholding from him the indebted service of his life; and is, in consequence, fully amenable to the execution of those righteous penalties, which, in the judgment, will be inflicted as the just reward of unrepented and unpardoned sin. But, the law is strict in its exactions upon all these points, both of religious and of moral duty; and in the view of it, and as judged by the standard which it exhibits, "there is no man living that sinneth not." It is the grand object of the Gospel to produce in us a conviction of this by bringing it to bear particularly upon the conscience and the heart; and it is impossible to consider it,

in any of its appeals or in any of its relations to the future, without *feeling* and being most fully *persuaded* that "by it, no man can be justified before GOD." It is the rule of a *perfect* righteousness, and can be satisfied only by a life of unfaultering obedience. "The soul that sinneth," is its sanction, "it shall die;" and, "he that offendeth in one point," it declares, "is guilty of the whole law;" "*all*, therefore, have sinned, and come short of the glory of GOD." "There is none that doeth good, no, not one." "Ye have robbed me, even this whole nation," says GOD; "and my soul," he declares, "*shall* be avenged upon such a people as this."

Indeed, my hearers, it is but requisite that we should form just apprehensions of the *spirituality* of the divine law, and then bring it to bear immediately upon us, with the full measure of its infinite and unfailing requisitions, to come at right views of our own condition, and arouse ourselves to a true consideration of our actual character and state. In many things, *all* will be found to offend; and, upon the ground of personal merit, it will be seen that none can stand before GOD. We are all turned out of the way; we have together become unprofitable.

2. We have here exhibited therefore, as in this instance of the text, in the second place, the *effect* which it is the object of revealed truths to accomplish, as awakening to the consciousness of sin. "As Paul reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled." The fatal consequences of his transgressions were brought vividly before him — the picture of his guilt was painted in unvarnished colors — the cloak with which he had concealed from himself his deformity, was torn away from him — the scales were for a moment removed from his hitherto obscured vision — a new light was shed in upon him — he saw himself as the *judgment* would reveal him — he *saw* and *trembled;* and *well*, you will say, he might. Yes, verily, my hearers, well he might. It was indeed no flattering exhibition which was made to him — "unrighteous, intemperate." The apostle reasoned with him upon the ground of his *acknowledged* character; and, what he

had been unable to perceive before, so pictured to him the influence which these were to have upon his future destiny, as to awaken apprehension and stir up within him fearful expectations of the end to which they were bringing him — "Felix trembled."

But is it the unrighteous, the intemperate only, who have cause to be thus alarmed? Would that even these might be excited to a true perception of the ruin which is impended over them, that they might be awakened to hear the voice of God whilst it is speaking to them; for "neither fornicators, nor adulterers, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God;" but they will not. Like the deaf adder they have shut their ears against "the voice of the charmer, charming never so wisely." They will neither listen to the reproofs of conscience, nor the admonitions of the word of God. The thunders of the divine law are muttering their denunciations over them; but, besotted in their transgressions, no fearfulness is awakened within them. The fierce lightnings of divine wrath are ever glaring upon them; but, shut up in the haunts of iniquity, and blinded by the intoxicating influence of temporal pleasure, they perceive them not. "They are sowing to the flesh, and they shall reap corruption." "They are sowing to the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind." Alas! for them, my hearers, that they should thus labor for "the wages of unrighteousness!"

In how many instances, however, have their iniquities been baptized into the common allowance of Christian men! — And, as to be judged by this rule, how many, who are now at ease in Zion, have reason to be alarmed at their state, in view of the prospect which is thus opened before them, and upon whom fearfulness and trembling should take hold, as if the terrors of death had come over them! They are willing indeed — most willing to admit, that "the adulterers, the thieves, and drunkards" shall not inherit the kingdom of God; but flatter themselves that none of these *baser* vices can attach to them. Alas! that they would not think the same of "the covetous, the revilers, and extortioners," — that they would not, at least,

judge *themselves* after the same rule by which they are governed in their judgment of others. It would break up the delusions of many — it would awaken them from the deep slumbers of spiritual death — it would save them in that day, when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed, and GOD shall judge them according to their works. And what shall serve to produce this effect with them? — Ah! what "refuges of lies" do they discover! — with what thoughtless indifference do they "cry peace to themselves, when there is no peace!" And, how do they banish from their apprehensions the most salutary convictions "of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment!" A Paul may be heard reasoning with them. They trembled perhaps for awhile; but then, in that language of Felix, they say to him, "Go thy way for this time, when I have a more convenient season I will call for thee;" and thus they lie to conscience and the HOLY GHOST, and cheat themselves to their own everlasting undoing.

Indeed, my hearers, there is not an individual amongst us who has not reason to tremble, if he has not already "fled for refuge" under a conviction of his condemnation and guilt; "to lay hold on the hope" which in the Gospel is "set before" him, in view of his final condition; and could you, — which GOD in mercy grant you soon may, — could you but see yourselves, your deep depravity, your utter alienation from GOD, and the ruin which has thus been involved on you, as the Gospel has revealed them, you would not go up into your beds to rest until your transgressions were pardoned, and you had concluded your peace with GOD. "Felix trembled:" it may be that, in so doing, he did more than you; yet, we have no knowledge that Felix repented. "The devils also believe and tremble." It may be therefore, that they likewise do more than you, yet their sorrow can never save them. How then, my unbelieving and impenitent friends, how shall you who do less — who do not even *fear* the judgments of GOD, nor *tremble* at his word — how shall you hope to be saved?

3. But, it is not every one that trembles in the view of his sinfulness, as being convinced of the perfect righteousness

which was required of him, and under a fearful apprehension of the issues to which the judgment will bring him, as illustrated in this instance of the text, and which we are now to consider in the third place, to whom these awakenings are of any avail. There is no one who is not at some period more than *ordinarily* excited in the view of his condition — with whom the HOLY SPIRIT does not *particularly* strive — to whom the fearful results of the final judgment do not bring *some* misgivings of conscience — and in whom *repentings* are not kindled, and *some* resolutions of a *new* and a *better* life. But, their goodness, alas! is too often, like "the early cloud, and as the morning dew, which soon passeth away." Whilst apprehension continues, they are *sincerely penitent.* Whilst Paul reasons, they tremble. But the world soon hushes their alarms. They have no fears beyond the preacher's denunciations. They say to him, therefore, "Go thy way," and, if admitting the justice of his claims, they add — "for this time;" hoping, it may be in truth, that there will be some "more convenient season, when they will call for him." It is surprising that they are not able to see the fallacy of this, and that one moment's reflection does not suffice to convince them, that the very same principle, whatever it may be, which induces a rejection of those claims upon them *now*, and calls for a postponement of their *present duty*, will act with tenfold power to-morrow, and with a far greater show of reason conduce to the same result.

The reasoning of the Apostle to Felix, and the reasoning of the ministers of GOD, under like circumstances, at all times, is based upon the most weighty considerations, and backed by the most powerful inducements which can ever be exhibited to the rational mind; and, though the force of this reasoning is verily increased by every additional transgression, and every day's delay in submitting to its influence, yet, such is the constitution of the human mind, that its susceptibilities of being acted on by it, are proportionably diminished as a successful resistance is opposed to its present claims. Here then, in that habit of procrastination which every day's indulgence increases, — in the utter uncertainty which, of necessity, attends the fulfil-

ment of deferred resolutions, both as it respects the disposition of the mind, and the opportunity afforded, — in the overwhelming force of present obligations, and, in the fearful consequences of an ultimate failure of being actuated by them, in all these things motives of infinite extent, and of infinitely combined influence, are found *urging*, *almost compelling* repentance; showing, at least, beyond the possibility of objection, why it should not be for one single moment delayed. But yet, in the hardness of his heart, and sustained only by the long-suffering mercy and compassion of God, the sinner regards it as a matter to be dispensed with at pleasure, and says, in effect, to the great Being who is thus urging his demands upon him, only in the exhibition of his grace, "Go thy way for this time, when I have a more convenient season I will call for thee."

In youth, when the appeal is defended by all the tenderness of parental regard, when the plea of affection is uttered in those terms of strongest endearment, "My son, give me thy heart;" the answer is, "Go thy way; I will rejoice in my youth, and my heart shall cheer me in the days of my youth;" in future days, when the world shall have lost its relish, and I can see no longer any pleasure in it, then "I will call for thee." Alas! lest those days should not come! In most instances they do not. But, when they do, what is their character, and how are they improved?

Manhood brings along with it the solicitudes of life. The whirl of business and of pleasure precludes the possibility of reflection. The whole soul is absorbed in schemes of mere temporal ambition. The world, with its vainest dependances is worshipped, and God in all his glory is despised. A philosopher without study, the man becomes a fool; to defend his folly, he ridicules religion, he scoffs at religious men; wise in his own conceit, the preaching of the cross is become foolishness to him; and, to fill up in his own character the fatal picture of St. Paul, he too often "by wisdom, knows not God." "God is not in all his thoughts."

By degrees, the shadow of life advances — the frost upon his head is thickened — the sands in his glass run low — and

how do they leave him? — a Christian? — a child of God? — better prepared than he once was to admit his claims? — more alive to a sense of his obligations? — more fully assimilated to the glorious likeness of his almighty Father? — more deeply sensible of the solemn issues of his approaching trial? — and fitted as by his privileges and opportunities might be expected of him — fitted for the change which is awaiting him? No, my hearers, no. They too often leave him an infidel, with the full measure of ingratitude to proclaim his enormous guilt — with the utmost weight of transgression, to sink him, without mercy, into the depths of hell. "O my soul! come not thou into their secret; unto their assembly, mine honor, be not thou united!"

And where, my hearers, in conclusion, let me ask you, where, in the midst of this perversity of human nature, for the picture assuredly is a true one, is wisdom to be found? — where, but in the humble obedience of him, who affixes to life its proper value, regarding the world only as a probationary scene, and turning to full account, in their bearing upon eternal destiny, the pleasures and the pains, the mercies and the judgments which are incident to its most uncertain and changeful conditions? The multitude say, by their conduct at least, if they do not declare it in their words, "To-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant;" with the rich fool, they pull down their barns and build greater, and there bestow all their fruits and their goods, and then say to their souls, "Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years, take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry." They admit not the unwelcome thought, that the time *is*, when they must be taken from them; and, secure in their possessions, they reply therefore to the voice of admonition, "Go thy way for this time, when I have a more convenient season I will call for thee." Affection may be heard earnestly entreating them not to make man their confidence, but they heed it not. The word of God brings home to them the remonstrance, "To-day, after so long a time — to day, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts;" but they are not aroused by it; and then

also, the providence of God, in the disappointment of their hopes, and the overthrow of their fondest expectations, most urgently calls them to *consider;* but, too often alas! — they are still left to the execution of the fearful sentence, "Because I have called, and ye refused, I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded,—I also will laugh at your calamity, I will mock when your fear cometh." We may, indeed, *seem* to "break his bands asunder, and cast away his cords from us," but God holdeth us, my hearers, by a tie we know not, and there is no escaping his judgment. *Impenitent,* his wrath will overtake us; *unpardoned,* his fear will ultimately take hold upon us; and better, far better will it be to exercise that fear of him *now,* which "is the beginning of wisdom," than tremble before him *then,* when "there shall be no room for repentance, though we should seek it carefully with tears."

VOWS AND PETITIONS.

Thee will I love, my Strength and Tower,
Thee will I love, my Joy and Crown;
Thee will I love with all my power,
In all my works, and Thee alone!
Thee will I love, till that pure fire
Fill my whole soul with chaste desire.

In darkness willingly I stray'd;
I sought Thee, yet from Thee I roved;
For wide my wandering thoughts were spread,
Thy creatures more than Thee I loved:
And now, if more at length I see,
'Tis through thy light, and comes from Thee.

I thank Thee, uncreated Sun,
That thy bright beams on me have shined:

I thank Thee, who hast overthrown
My foes, and heal'd my wounded mind;
I thank Thee, whose enlivening voice
Bids my freed heart in Thee rejoice.

Give to my eyes refreshing tears,
Give to my heart chaste, hallow'd fires;
Give to my soul, with filial fears,
The love that all heaven's host inspires;
That all my powers, with all their might,
In thy sole glory may unite.

Thee will I love, my Joy, my Crown!
Thee will I love, my LORD, my GOD!
Thee will I love, though all may frown,
And thorns and briers perlex my road;
Yea, when my flesh and heart decay,
Thee shall I love in endless day.

THE BROKEN HEART.

Now to thine altar, LORD,
A broken heart I bring;
And wilt thou graciously accept
Of such a worthless thing?

To CHRIST, the bleeding Lamb,
My faith directs her eyes:
All other offerings are vain,
But not his sacrifice.

That moment He expired,
The law was satisfied;
And now to its severest claims
I answer, "JESUS died."